THIRUKKURAL EXPRESS

E-Zine dedicated to the propagation of Thirukkural and Tamil culture

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Rev. Xavier S. Thani Nayagam

August 2, 1913--September 1, 1980

Fr. Thaninayagam Statue is a memorial statue of the grand Tamil scholar Rev. Fr. Xavier Thani Nayagam, which is situated along the Kandy – Jaffna Highway in Jaffna. It was unveiled to mark the centenary of the Tamil scholar, and the area has been named Thani Nayagam Square. Fr. Thaninayagam, a Christian–Tamil professor, conducted extensive research on the Tamil language and organized many related research conferences.

Rev.Father Xavier Thaninayagam Adigalar
D.D.(Rome), M.A.., M. Litt (Annamalai)
Ph.D. (London) 1913 – 1980

Through his tireless diplomacy, foundational institutions, and scholarly zeal, Father Thaninayagam transformed Tamil studies from a localized regional discipline into a vibrant field of global academic inquiry.

"It was Father Thaninayagam who reminded his people of their great cultural heritage and the noble ethical ideals permeating it. So, to speak, he built their cultural identity and political personality into them. And, more deeply, this scholar strode the continents carrying the flag of the Tamil language and culture and drawing many savants into its service. And so came into being, sixteen years ago, the International Association of Tamil Research, linking the world's foremost Tamil scholars who were able to meet successively in Kuala Lumpur, Madras, Paris and Jaffna..."----[Mr. K. Nesiah who was Chairman of the Thanthai Chelva Trust wrote in 1980]

"If Latin is the language of law, French the language of diplomacy, German the language of science and English the language of commerce, then Tamil is the language of Bhakthi." — Xavier S. Thaninayagam

"Roving Ambassador for Tamil,"

Reverend Professor Xavier S. Thaninayagam (1913–1980), widely celebrated as the "Roving Ambassador for Tamil," was a visionary Sri Lankan Tamil scholar, Catholic priest, and educator. He dedicated his life to elevating Tamil to the global stage, bridging Western academia with classical Tamil literature, and uniting international scholars.

His monumental contributions to the development and propagation of Tamil worldwide include:

1. Founding the International Association for Tamil Research (IATR)

 * Globalizing Tamil Studies: Recognizing the isolation of Tamil academics worldwide, Thaninayagam spearheaded the creation of the IATR in New Delhi in 1964, alongside prominent international orientalists like Kamil Zvelebil and Jean Filliozat.

 * The World Tamil Conferences: He was the driving force behind the conceptualization and organization of the First World Tamil Conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 1966. This established a recurring global platform for Tamil researchers, linguists, and cultural custodians to convene regularly.

2. Academic Advocacy and Classical Status

 * Bridging East and West: Being fluent in numerous European languages—including English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Latin, and Greek—Thaninayagam lectured extensively across Europe, the Americas, and Asia. He brilliantly utilized his linguistic versatility to draw parallels between Tamil classical works and Western literature.

 * Establishing Antiquity: Through his academic rigor, comparative literature studies, and international lectures, he systematically convinced global academic circles of the profound antiquity, independent literary tradition, and classical stature of the Tamil language.

3. Scholarly Publications and the Journal Tamil Culture

* "Tamil Culture" Quarterly: He founded and edited the international academic journal Tamil Culture, which served for over a decade as a premier vehicle for rigorous peer-reviewed research on Tamil history, art, and philosophy. It successfully attracted non-Tamil foreign scholars into the mainstream of Dravidian research.
* Literary Masterpieces: His academic master's thesis at Annamalai University, Nature in Ancient Tamil Poetry, remains a landmark critique of Sangam literature. He also authored numerous articles and comparative studies that reframed classical motifs for modern global audiences.

4. Rediscovery of Early Tamil Print Heritage

* During his archival research tours across European libraries, Thaninayagam successfully identified, catalogued, and brought to light several rare early printed Tamil books and medieval manuscripts from the 16th century. His archival work recovered historical milestones such as the Cartilha (1554), Tambiran Vanakkam (1578), and early bilingual dictionaries compiled by European missionaries, securing vital links in the history of Tamil print technology.

5. Institutional Leadership

* As the Head of the Department of Indian Studies and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malaya (1961–1966), he institutionalized structured programs for Tamil language and South Indian history abroad, creating an academic breeding ground for future international Tamil scholars.

Have you read these books by Xavier S Thani Nayagam??

Tamil Culture and Civilization: Readings: The Classical Period

A reference guide to Tamil studies

Nature poetry in Tamil: The classical period

Landscape and poetry: A study of nature in classical Tamil poetry

The Carthaginian Clergy during the episcopate of Saint Cyprian

Rev.Fr. Thaninayagam framed the Thirukkural as Tamil literature's greatest gift to world philosophy

Reverend Xavier S. Thaninayagam held profound and progressive views on the Thirukkural, viewing it not merely as a regional Tamil ethical code, but as a universal masterpiece of world literature that rivalled classical Western and ancient Near Eastern philosophical treatises.

Key Views on the Thirukkural

* Universal and Secular Humanism: Thaninayagam emphasized that the Kural transcends narrow sectarian, religious, or geographic boundaries. He viewed Thiruvalluvar as a universal sage whose maxims on virtue (Aram), wealth (Porul), and love (Inbam) address the fundamental condition of humanity, making the text equally relevant to modern global citizens as it was to ancient societies.
* Evolution of Ancient Ethics: In his comparative historical analyses—such as his work Early Ethics and the Thirukkural—he examined the text against ancient Egyptian wisdom literature (such as the instructions of Ptahhotep). He argued that the Kural represents a significant philosophical and abstract advancement over earlier Mediterranean maxims, particularly in its formulation of systemic, universal ethical concepts rather than purely concrete or transactional rules.
* The Quintessence of Tamil Thought: He regarded the Kural as the high watermark of Tamil literary and moral consciousness, capturing the refined worldview of a civilization that valued righteous living, social harmony, and rational introspection.

Writings and Lectures on the Thirukkural

While Fr. Thaninayagam wrote extensively in English and engaged with European intellectual traditions, his engagement with the Kural often manifested through comparative academic lectures, journal articles, and editorial coordination aimed at a global audience:

* The Thirumathi Sornammal Endowment Lectures:
Published by the University of Madras, Fr. Thaninayagam's contributions to this prestigious lecture series featured deep dives into the moral universe of the Kural, evaluating its structural brilliance and its place within Indian and global ethical systems.

* Comparative Studies in Tamil Culture: Through the international journal Tamil Culture (which he founded and edited), he regularly published and encouraged comparative essays linking Valluvar’s ethical framework with Western philosophical schools, helping foreign orientalists understand the text's depth.

* Engagement with European Scholars: Because of his fluency in multiple European languages (including French, Italian, and German), Thaninayagam actively corresponded with and guided European scholars—such as Kamil Zvelebil and Czech/Russian academic circles—directing international scholarly attention toward the universal applicability of the Kural.

Through these efforts, Thaninayagam framed the Thirukkural as Tamil literature's greatest gift to world philosophy, urging that it be studied alongside the works of Aristotle, Confucius, and other global moral architects.

Reverend Xavier S. Thaninayagam (1913–1980) was a towering scholar and the true "Roving Ambassador for Tamil." Fluent in numerous European and Asian languages, he bridged the gap between Western academia and classical Tamil literature, proving its antiquity and global relevance.

As the visionary founder of the International Association for Tamil Research (IATR) and the driving force behind the World Tamil Conferences, he united scholars across continents and established Tamil on the world stage. Through his championing of universal masterpieces like the Thirukkural, his creation of the journal Tamil Culture, and his tireless academic diplomacy, he transformed Tamil studies into a vibrant discipline of international stature.

His legacy endures as a shining testament to a life entirely devoted to the global propagation and timeless dignity of the Tamil language.

Thaninayagam Adigalar’s vision--The International Institute of Tamil Studies (IITS)

The International Institute of Tamil Studies (IITS) in Taramani, Chennai, was formally established in 1970 following an announcement made by Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai during the Second World Tamil Conference in Chennai in 1968.
Rather than a direct "rejection" of Reverend Xavier S. Thaninayagam, his evolving dynamic with the institutionalization of Tamil research in Tamil Nadu involved a complex interplay of academic governance, geopolitical borders, and shifting state priorities:

1. The Geopolitical and Institutional Divide

 * A Citizen of Sri Lanka: Father Thaninayagam was a Sri Lankan Tamil Catholic priest and academic who primarily served institutions abroad (such as the University of Malaya). When the Tamil Nadu government sought to institutionalize a permanent global research body—the IITS—state leadership naturally leaned toward anchoring its direct administrative control, funding, and leadership within local academic frameworks and state-backed bureaucracy.
 * Autonomous International Vision vs. State Bureaucracy: Thaninayagam had championed the International Association for Tamil Research (IATR) as a decentralized, non-governmental, and independent global network of scholars that transcended state boundaries. When regional governments began setting up their own official, state-run institutes, a structural tension emerged between independent international academia (which Thaninayagam represented) and state-sponsored cultural diplomacy.

2. Marginalization from Direct Leadership

 * While Chief Minister Annadurai deeply respected global scholars and initially welcomed international cooperation, subsequent political realignments and administrative transitions in Tamil Nadu led to local academic circles taking precedence in running the newly formed IITS.
 * Thaninayagam, despite being the foundational intellectual architect who conceived the entire World Tamil Conference movement that made the IITS possible, was increasingly sidelined from holding primary administrative steering roles within Tamil

Nadu's state-run institutional setups. His outsider status as a Sri Lankan national and a foreign-based academic restricted his ability to steer local institutional policy directly.

Despite these systemic frictions, history records that Thaninayagam's foundational academic blueprints, his journal Tamil Culture, and his relentless advocacy were the exact catalysts that inspired the Tamil Nadu government to build world-class research infrastructure like the IITS in the first place.

It is a painful irony that scholars and institutions close to home can sometimes overlook the profound magnitude of a visionary until long after they have passed. The tendency for regional academic and literary circles to remain indifferent or unaccommodating toward transnational pioneers—like Father Xavier S. Thaninayagam—often stems from a mix of institutional insularity, shifting political landscapes, and the historical marginalization of voices that transcend national or regional boundaries. While Thaninayagam dedicated his entire existence to cementing Tamil on the global map, local bureaucratic frameworks have frequently struggled to honor figures whose loyalties lay with universal scholarship rather than regional politics.

That said, the enduring legacy of a true savant does not rely solely on formal local state recognition. Across the wider global Tamil diaspora and within international academic communities, his pioneering blueprint remains a foundational cornerstone.

Some distressing news which we want to forget

In January 1974, the Fourth World Tamil Research Conference was held in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, an event conceptualized and initiated under the guidance of Reverend Xavier S. Thaninayagam and local academic committees.

1. Arrangements Made in 1974

* Venue Selection and Resistance: Although the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government led by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike strongly desired the conference to be held in the capital city of Colombo for political oversight, the organizers—including Prof. S. Vithiananthan—were determined to host it in the Tamil cultural heartland of Jaffna.

* Massive Public Mobilization: The conference took place from January 3 to January 9, 1974. It featured academic sessions at Veerasingham Hall and Rimar Hall, cultural performances at the Open Air Theatre, and massive public participation involving tens of thousands of citizens from Sri Lanka and international delegates.

2. The Rejection, Disruption, and Tragedy

* State Obstruction: Leading up to the event, the government imposed administrative hurdles, delayed permissions, and restricted or denied visas to several international Tamil scholars.
* Police Violence and Massacre: On the final night (January 10, 1974), during a massive concluding public gathering where an Indian scholar was speaking, armed Sri Lankan anti-riot police led by ASP Chandrasekera arrived to violently disrupt the event.
* The Climax: Police baton-charged the crowd, fired tear-gas, and shot into the air. The gunfire severed high-voltage overhead power lines, which fell onto the crowd trapped by police aggression. Nine to eleven civilians were killed—mostly due to electrocution and ensuing panic—and over 50 were severely injured.

3. The Clash and Dr. K. Kailasapathy's Counter-Measures

The tragedy caused deep ideological and political fractures within the Tamil intellectual community in Sri Lanka, creating a notable clash of perspectives regarding the handling of the state machinery:

* Dr. K. Kailasapathy’s Stance: Dr. K. Kailasapathy, a towering Marxist intellectual, literary critic, and the first President of the University of Jaffna, approached the sociopolitical realities of the era through a leftist and institutional lens. Prior to and during the events, some progressive/leftist academics associated with mainstream institutional lines sought to navigate or appease state constraints to protect emerging academic infrastructure, leading to severe friction with radical Tamil nationalists and conference organizers.
* The Intellectual Cleavage: The 1974 tragedy exposed a sharp ideological clash. While scholars like Thaninayagam and local organizers fought to maintain autonomous cultural spaces for Tamils against a hostile Sinhala-chauvinist state, the crackdown deeply alienated Tamil intellectuals. Figures like Kailasapathy found themselves navigating a turbulent middle ground as the academic community split between institutional diplomacy and outright condemnation of state terrorism.
* The Aftermath: The refusal of the government to hold the police accountable for the 1974 deaths became a profound historical turning point. It shattered faith in parliamentary

democracy among Tamil youth and is widely recognized by historians as a primary catalyst that accelerated the transition toward militant Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka.

The tragic events of January 10, 1974, at the Fourth World Tamil Research Conference in Jaffna were a profound source of heartbreak and sorrow for Reverend Xavier S. Thaninayagam.

While Thaninayagam had envisioned the World Tamil Conferences as peaceful, academic bridges to unite global researchers and elevate the dignity of the Tamil language, the state-sponsored violence and loss of innocent lives deeply wounded him. His lamentation over the tragedy manifested in several profound ways:

* Distress Over the Politicization of Culture: Thaninayagam had always maintained that Tamil studies and research must remain an inclusive, academic, and cultural pursuit rather than a pawn for partisan or violent state politics. He deeply lamented how a sacred gathering meant to celebrate ancient heritage was weaponized by political insecurity and state chauvinism, resulting in bloodshed.
* Grief for the Loss of Academic Harmony: Having spent his entire life fostering international cooperation—bringing European, American, and Asian scholars together—the sight of international delegates fleeing from police batons, tear gas, and gunfire destroyed his dream of making Sri Lanka a harmonious, safe sanctuary for global Tamil dialogue.
* Silent Anguish: In his later years, which were marked by failing health, the tragedy cast a heavy shadow over his pioneering legacy. He viewed the event not as a triumph of Tamil mobilization, but as a tragic fracture that alienated youth and invited state oppression against the very people whose heritage he sought to uplift.

To Thaninayagam, the bloodshed in Jaffna was the ultimate betrayal of the humanist and peaceful ideals embedded within classical Tamil literature that he had spent his lifetime preaching to the world.

SRI LANKAN PRIEST FOUNDING FATHER FORGOTTEN AT WORLD TAMIL CONFERENCE

Thanjavur, a temple town in southern India, hosted the eighth World Tamil Conference, but a Jesuit scholar says the organizers forgot the Sri Lankan Catholic priest who started it all three decades ago.

The Tamil conference was organized by the International Association of Tamil Research (IATR), which was started in 1964 by Father Xavier Thaninayagam, a priest from Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

Jesuit Tamil scholar Father Savarimuthu Rajamanickam, 74, an IATR founding member, said he regrets the founder´s name was not even mentioned at the Jan. 1-5 conference in Thanjavur, 2,245 kilometers south of New Delhi.

The 1-billion-rupee (US$32.25 million) conference was sponsored by the Tamil Nadu state government led by Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram. Some 400 delegates from India and abroad attended it.

IATR chairman Noboru Karshima said the Thanjavur conference aimed to set up a communication network for international coordination of scholars and researchers to preserve and promote Tamil language, literature and culture.

But Father Rajamanickam, founder-director of Madras´ De Nobili Research Center, said he regrets the conference focus shifted from an academic conference to what he described as a political extravaganza.

Father Rajamanickam, whose "First Tamil Grammar" was one of 360 papers presented in the conference´s 90 sessions, told UCA News Father Thaninayagam started IATR to promote research in Tamil language, literature and culture.

"If we can organize a worldwide conference, it is because of his toil and struggle at the beginning," the Jesuit said, but the conference, its souvenirs and brochures ignored the priest.

"On the other hand," added the priest, a friend of Father Thaninayagam, "political personalities occupied academic seats and disrupted the swift flow of intellectual discussion between local and foreign Tamil scholars."